## Implementing the PA Core Standards: A Primer on “Close Reading of Text”

(adapted from *Close Reading-Aspen Institute, 2012)*

Close Reading and Text-Dependent Analysis

**Introduction**

Among the most significant of the shifts in PA Core Standards - English language arts are the following expectations: (<http://static.pdesas.org/content/documents/PA%20Core%20Standards%20ELA%20PreK-5%20March%202014.pdf>)

***Balancing the reading of informational and literary texts so that students can access nonfiction and authentic texts, as well as literature***

***Focusing on close and careful reading of text so that students are learning from the text***

***Building a staircase of complexity (i.e., each grade level requires a “step” of growth on the “staircase”) so that students graduate college or career ready***

***Supporting writing from sources (i.e., using evidence from text to inform or make an argument) so that students use evidence and respond to the ideas, events, facts, and arguments presented in the texts they read***

***Stressing an academically focused vocabulary so that students can access more complex texts***

These expectations create a significant challenge, as schools at all levels have paid insufficient attention to the development of students’ reading comprehension as they progress through increasingly complex texts. This challenge is exacerbated by the readability levels of high school texts, which have trended downward in difficulty, while the readability levels of college texts have increased.ii In 2006, the average reading level of college texts was 350 Lexile levels higher than those at the end of high school—which represents more than a third of the entire reading-level range from second through 12th grade.iii

To prepare students for the rigors of college and careers, then, schools must place a greater emphasis on the teaching of increasingly complex texts. There is a dispute, however, among researchers and practitioner-leaders on the role of the Close Reading strategy in achieving this goal, including the extent to which teachers should assist students with background knowledge in order to help them construct meaning of the text.

Experts in the reading research and broader practitioner communities have offered what appear to be divergent perspectives on the kinds of instructional practices that facilitate the development of the deep comprehension called for in the standards. Early training and messaging by some organizations suggested that Close Reading eliminated the privilege of background knowledge and that pre-reading strategies were to be excised from Close Reading lessons. Other experts questioned these recommendations, pointing out that readers *always* use background knowledge of the world, along with knowledge of how language and text work, to build a coherent representation of what the text says. Some researchers and advocates expressed concern that recommendations to minimize the role of prior knowledge will widen the gap between poor and proficient readers.iv

There is a substantial body of research that should not be ignored in making decisions about the use of the Close Reading strategy. Readers’ background knowledge always shapes comprehension, allowing them to combine new information with what they already know to construct new knowledge. What readers bring to a text defines what they can take from it— there is no eliminating the advantage that greater background knowledge confers.

We also know from experience, however, that many students are not taught how to read appropriately complex text independently and with precision. The PA Core explicitly describes a set of reading and analytic abilities that can only be developed through regular practice and feedback, such as by interpreting words and phrases as they are used in a text, analyzing the structure of text, and explaining how an author reasons and uses evidence. The PA Core expects—and equity demands—that *all* students have the chance to productively struggle with complex texts. Especially for students with lower reading skills and gaps in background knowledge; Close Reading can be an important strategy to accelerate and deepen their own learning.

Teachers need to know *when* and *how* to make use of Close Reading in strengthening students’ reading, furthering students’ independence, and deepening their reading comprehension. To assist teachers in understanding and employing Close Reading, this primer addresses the following key questions:

1. What is Close Reading of text, and what are its essential attributes? How, and for what purposes, should teachers employ this strategy?
2. What is the role of background knowledge in the development of reading comprehension, and when should teachers activate and/or provide background knowledge?
3. What should teachers and district leaders consider about Close Reading as they prepare to implement it in practice?

**Close Reading Defined**

Definition: Close Reading of text involves an investigation of a short piece of text, with multiple readings done over multiple instructional lessons. Through text-based questions and discussion, students are guided to deeply analyze and appreciate various aspects of the text, such as key vocabulary and how its meaning is shaped by context; attention to form, tone, imagery and/or rhetorical devices; the significance of word choice and syntax; and the discovery of different levels of meaning as passages are read multiple times. The teacher’s goal in the use of Close Reading is to gradually release responsibility to students—moving from an environment where the teacher models for students the strategies to one where students employ the strategies on their own when they read independently v. Close Reading does more than advance reading development; it is a mechanism for teaching about logical arguments and critiquing the reasoning of others, for gleaning evidence from text and applying critical thinking skills. Close Reading is as much a way of thinking and processing text that is emphasized throughout the PA Core as it is about a way of reading a singular piece of text. Close Reading cannot be reserved for students who already are strong readers; it should be a vehicle through which all students grapple with advanced concepts and participate in engaging discussions regardless of their independent reading level.

**Attributes of Close Reading Lessons**

Close Reading strategies will vary depending on the content under consideration, the place in the curriculum, and the goals of the particular lesson. But most Close Reading lessons will share the following attributes:

1. **Selection of a brief, high-quality, complex text.** Limiting the length of the passage allows students the opportunity to apply new skills and strategies through multiple readings of the text.
2. **Individual reading of the text.** Students unable to read the text independently might engage in a partner read or a group read in lieu of an independent attempt.
3. **Group reading aloud.** A group read aloud might be teacher- or student-led. This practice supports the engagement of all students, especially those who struggle with reading the text independently, and reinforces the primacy of the text throughout Close Reading lessons.
4. **Text-based questions and discussion that focus on discrete elements of the text.** Questions and discussion may focus on the author’s word choices and repetition, specific sentences, literary devices, academic vocabulary, or particular passages containing information that is key to the curricular objective
5. **Discussion among students.** These discussions, either in small groups or across the whole class, will ensure that the text—as opposed to personal reflections—remains the focus as the reader explores the author’s choices.
6. **Writing about the text.** Students may be asked to reflect on the knowledge gained through Close Reading in short or long written passages.

**Background Knowledge and Close Reading**

Part of the debate about the use of Close Reading as an instructional strategy is the role of background knowledge in the process, and when background knowledge should be constructed. Research establishes a reciprocal relationship between background knowledge and comprehension—an individual with significant knowledge about a topic

uses that knowledge to build a coherent representation of what the text says. A knowledgeable reader needs only to update his or her preexisting situation model with new information presented in the text, while a reader who lacks background knowledge on the topic of the text is less able to build an accurate representation of what the text means.vi Fortunately, teachers can teach less skilled readers what they need to become skilled readers, beginning with building disciplinary and world knowledge.vii Teachers need to know their students well in order to gauge how much background knowledge students have (or don’t have) and the extent to which background knowledge should be provided to ensure they are able to comprehend the text.

For the purposes of Close Reading, it is essential to distinguish between the background knowledge that is required to understand the text and the knowledge

sought to be gained from reading the text. Teachers should ensure their students have enough context and background knowledge to access the text, either through prior instruction and/or pre-reading activities. That said, previewing the content of the text undermines the value of a Close Reading exercise. If a teacher feels the need to deliver content from the text rather than allow students to discover the content independently and through text-dependent questions and discussion, then either the text is not appropriate for a Close Reading lesson or the teacher does not believe his/her students are ready for the rigor that Close Reading of complex text demands. While teachers need to exercise discretion in the selection of texts and related instructional practices, it is essential that all students engage in Close Reading of complex texts that meet grade-level expectations established by the PA Core.

**Additional Considerations When Implementing Close Reading in Practice**

***• Close Reading, as a multifaceted strategy for teaching reading, should be situated within a broader, comprehensive literacy framework.***

The teaching of reading is a complex, multilayered effort that requires the orchestration of a myriad of intentional instructional decisions and a variety of instructional techniques. Close Reading of text is one important strategy for fostering independence and analytic skills.

The PA Core standards draw attention to the critical gap between reading demands and expectations in K-12 settings and those in college and careers. This gap has led to a heightened awareness of the qualities and complexity of texts being chosen for curricular inclusion and used for instruction. Text complexity plays an integral role in the planning and execution of the Close Reading strategy. Teachers implementing Close Reading need varied opportunities to learn about text complexity and practice applying the process for identifying appropriate text at their respective grade levels. To be suited for Close Reading instruction, a text must be of the highest quality, with a richness and depth that supports and deserves deep analysis. Teachers’ ability to identify rich, complex text—based on quantitative and qualitative measures, as well as variables related to the specific students and tasks at hand—is as important as understanding the principles that undergird the concept of text complexity.

In order to bring the Close Reading strategy to life, teachers will need to deepen their understanding of text-dependent questions—how they are constructed, and how they are intentionally crafted to support the careful examination of text called for in Close Reading. Text-dependent questions, as the name suggests, ask students to provide evidence from the text and draw inferences based on what the text says. Well-constructed text-dependent questions cause students to reflect on the text as opposed to reading quickly to get the gist of the selection.

The inclusion of these instructional strategies in daily practice will require professional development that meets teachers at their current level of understanding. While the specifics are best determined by districts and schools, it is important to acknowledge that merely exhorting teachers to employ Close Reading and text-dependent questions is inadequate. Teachers need to understand what the PA Core expects and the research undergirding these expectations, they need resources to guide them in adapting new strategies for their classrooms, and they need opportunities to practice and get feedback that improves their effectiveness.ix

***• Close Reading is used judiciously and employed for specific learning outcomes.***

A Close Reading lesson is typically situated within a longer unit of study and might be employed once or twice during the unit, for two to four days each time. For example, an excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech might be the subject of a Close Reading exercise in a history class after several days of study focused on the civil rights era. Alternately, or perhaps in concert, the text selection could also be used in an English language arts class focused on rhetoric.

The broader curricular context in which Close Reading takes place usually mitigates the need for extensive pre-reading activities, as prior instruction not directly related to the text prepares students to engage in the Close Reading lesson independently. This understanding also helps frame the role of Close Reading as one strategy within a teacher’s literacy and content development toolkit.

The specific instructional moves that define the Close Reading strategy are modified and adapted by the purpose of a particular lesson in order to meet the developmental level of learners. Teachers make critical decisions about the text chosen and the questions asked to facilitate deep understanding of content and/or the author’s intent.

While a Close Reading lesson usually will sit within a broader unit of related content, there are occasions when a teacher might choose to have students complete a “cold read.” Such an exercise can prepare students for PA Core-aligned assessments, and for the real-world experience of encountering text in unfamiliar contexts.

***• Close Reading builds skill and motivation in the reader.***

Grappling with rich, complex texts is an exciting, thought-expanding experience that can change minds and mold beliefs. Repeated opportunities to process and manage such texts enhance the reader’s knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and the world—an experience all students should have. Historically, though, this approach has been reserved for our more advanced students; those deemed less able have been denied access to rich, rigorous text. Teachers who have implemented Close Reading in their classrooms are finding that being challenged by complex texts is not, as they feared, tripping students up; on the contrary, it is actually motivating students to work harder and think more deeply.

**Conclusion**

Educators need to harness the knowledge of research, the wisdom of experience, and the imperative for improvement to implement Close Reading effectively within the context of a comprehensive literacy framework. Teachers have to be innovative and creative, while connecting decisions about instructional practice to the research on reading development and the explicit demands of the PA Core. Hence we recommend that practitioners:

1. Are deliberate and intentional determining when, and for what instructional purposes, Close Reading is employed. The goal is to move students to read closely, independent of the teacher.
2. Understand that while engaged in Close Reading lessons, students naturally use prior knowledge to deepen their comprehension of the text. Teachers should activate prior knowledge and build background knowledge when appropriate, while ensuring that students’ examination of text is the central means of conveying information.

ii Jeanne S. Chall, Sue S. Conard, and Susan H. Harris, *An Analysis of Textbooks in Relation to Declining SAT Scores* (Princeton, N.J.: College Board,

1977).

iii Gary L. Williamson, *Aligning the Journey With a Destination: A Model for K–16 Reading Standards* (Durham, N.C.: MetaMetrix Inc., 2006).

iv Suzanne M. Adolf et al., Developmental Changes in Reading Comprehension: Implications for Assessment and Instruction,” in S. Jay Samuels and Alan Farstrup, eds., *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction*, 4th edition (New York: International Reading Association, 2011).

v P. David Pearson and Margaret C. Gallagher, “The Instruction of Reading Comprehension,” *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 8, no. 3 (July 1983) 317-344.

vi Walter Kintsch, “The Role of Knowledge in Discourse Comprehension: A Construction-Integration Model.” *Psychological Review 95, no. 2* (1988) 163-182.

vii Nell K. Duke et al., “Essential Elements of Fostering and Teaching Reading Comprehension,” in S. Jay Samuels and Alan Farstrup, eds., *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction*, 4th edition (New York: International Reading Association, 2011).

ix For more information on text complexity and the design and use of text-dependent questions, see www.aspendrl.org. Joaquin Tamayo, Jr., “Tools for

Teachers Facilitator’s Guide: Close Reading & Text-Dependent Questions.”